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## Common Crane in Central Platte Valley, Nebraska, March 1999, and a Discussion of Prior North American Records

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Common Crane in Central Platte Valley, Nebraska, March 1999, and a Discussion of Prior North American Records.

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On 5 March, 1999, a report appeared on the listserver of a Common Crane sighted at 2.30 p.m. that day by Tammy VerCauteren (fide Paul Tebbel) about 2 miles east of Lowell Road in southeastern Buffalo County. The next morning, WRS drove to the location. After about 2 hours of searching, he refound the Common Crane at 8:57 a.m. among Sandhill Cranes about 50 meters south of Elm Island Road at a spot 2 miles east of Lowell Road. It was refound by SJD at 11:00 a.m. on March 9 northeast of the junction of roads X and 41 in northeast Kearney County. (The south channel of the Platte, just south of Elm Island Road, is the boundary between Buffalo and Kearney Counties.)

The Common Crane was easy to spot as it was as tall or taller than the tallest Sandhill Cranes present and was paler than most if not all of them. In fact, it was so pale WRS suspected it might be *leucistic*, although SJD thought it to be no paler than the palest Sandhill Cranes, although probably unusually pale for the species; perhaps the early morning light was responsible for its pale appearance on March 6.

The bill was horn-colored and the crown, nape, and foreneck were black, leaving a pale gray-white line up each side of the neck, which terminated just before each eye. We could not discern any red coloration on the crown. Otherwise the plumage was pale gray. WRS saw the bird in flight on March 6, and was impressed by the entirely black primaries and secondaries contrasting strongly with the pale gray wing coverts. In flight, the black tail feathers were also revealed; when the bird is at rest, the much-elongated tertials and inner secondaries are folded over the gray tail feathers, giving a black and gray mottled look to the "bustle." It has been suggested that due to its paleness, the bird might be a Whooping Crane-Sandhill Crane hybrid, but the entirely black secondaries--a feature possessed by neither of the putative "parent" species--would appear to rule out this possibility.

Messages (to WRS) from Jeff Bouton and Steve DuBois indicated that this was probably the same pale to "almost white" (DuBois) bird which they and others saw at Delta Junction, Alaska, from 15 September to late September, 1998. DuBois had noted some reddish coloration "at times" on its crown. Dave Rintoul (1999) suggested that it had migrated down the eastern edge of the Front Range in Colorado in fall of 1998 with its "fellow trans-Bering Sea Sandhill Cranes" to winter in eastern New Mexico or western Texas. David Sarkozi, who noted that "Ninety percent of Texas is private and inaccessible," answered questions on the TEXBIRDS and KS-BIRD-L listservers as to why nobody sees Common Cranes anywhere but in Nebraska. Sarkozi noted (1999), "You guys have it lucky there [in Nebraska]; all the cranes are lined up in one place, here they are scattered over an area several times the size of your little state."

Following the initial sightings, the Common Crane was seen by many observers in the same general area until March 26 (Loren and Babs Padelford, Nebraska Birdline). This is the 12th acceptable sighting in North America, although it is possible that as few as 6 individuals were involved in these sightings (American Birding Association 1996). A report in Texas from 10 January to 3 February, 1979, was not accepted by the Texas Ornithological Society Records Committee (Lingle 1996).

The first four sightings were from 11 to 20 December, 1957, in Alberta; 20 March, 1958, in Alberta; between 24 April and 10 May, 1958, at Fairbanks, Alaska; and 19 September, 1958, in Alberta (American Birding Association 1996). All these sightings may have been of the same individual. One was at Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge, New Mexico, on 10 March, 1961 (American Birding Association 1996). Four sightings in Nebraska between 1972 and 1974 may have involved only two or possibly three different birds. One was near North Platte, Lincoln County, between 26 and 31 March, 1972 (Tremaine et al 1972, contra American Birding Association 1996) and another was at Elm Creek, Phelps County, between 31 March and 1 April, 1972 (Tremaine et al 1972). One was seen in southern Buffalo County on 16 March, 1974, and in northern Kearney County on 25 March, 1974 (Nebraska Bird Review 42: 63-64).

The "single bird hypothesis" in 1972 would require one bird to fly from the North Platte area eastward to Elm Creek on 31 March. This would seem to be an

unlikely flight pattern, although cranes have been seen flying high and parallel to the Platte River (Tremaine et al 1972). A comparison of photographs of the 1972 bird at Elm Creek and the 1974 bird in Kearney County suggested they were different birds (NBR 42: 63-64). Another bird was in southern Hall and northern Adams Counties in Nebraska from 30 to 31 March, 1996 (Lingle 1996). Based on published photographs, this bird seems significantly darker in color relative to Sandhill Cranes than the 1999 Nebraska bird. Finally, prior to the current sighting, one was at Delta Junction, Alaska, in September of 1998; as discussed above, this is likely the same bird described in this note.

The provenance of Common Cranes in North America has not been determined with certainty, but it seems likely that occasionally an individual or even family group may wander into the breeding range of Sandhill Crane and then migrate with the Sandhill Cranes into North America to winter. The breeding ranges of the two species in eastern Siberia are separated by about 600 miles (Flint et al 1984). It has been suggested that the presumed two different birds in Nebraska in 1972 may have been a family group separated by hunter disturbance on the wintering grounds in Texas (Tremaine et al 1972).

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